



CAPITOL TIDBITS

by Sen. Bob McCaslin

4th Legislative District

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The 2005 session of the Washington State Legislature began at noon on January 10. The regular 105-day session is scheduled to end on April 24. The House and Senate convened after the grand re-opening of the Legislative Building which had been closed since the Nisqually earthquake on February 28, 2001.

Re-Vote tops Senate Republicans' agenda

Looming large over the first day of the session was the mounting evidence that Gregoire's apparent margin of victory (129 votes) is fraught with votes cast by convicted felons whose right to vote has not been restored by the courts; people not registered to vote; and votes cast by people who are deceased.

Since Election Day, there have been warning signs that King County's elections office has major problems. King County alone had 1,800 more votes cast than there are registered voters in King County. In addition, King County has admitted that at least 350 provisional ballots, cast by people whose voter registration was not verified, were improperly put into vote-counting machines at polling places. Once those ballots went into the machines, there was no way to separate them from the legitimate votes cast.

After opening ceremonies, Senate Republicans moved to delay certification of the gubernatorial race for two weeks to give the Chelan County Superior Court time to review the merits of the election challenge filed by the Washington State Republican Party. Several private citizens have also filed affidavits with the Washington State Supreme Court challenging the gubernatorial election.

Senate Republicans argued that delaying certification is not a political question or a partisan question, but one that goes to the very core of what makes a democracy work – the trust of voters.

The motion to delay certification was defeated by Democrat legislators who hold the majority in the Senate.

During a joint session of the House and Senate on the second day of session, a motion was again made to delay certification of the governor's election. After more than an hour of debate, with Republicans speaking out on behalf of Washington's citizens and their right to have confidence in their election process, the Democrat majorities defeated the motion on a vote of 65-80.

So far, one bill has been filed to force a runoff election between Rossi and Gregoire. This measure, Senate Bill 5079, is sponsored by 14 Republican senators. With Democrat majorities in both the House and Senate, it is not likely such a bill will be enacted into law.

Election reform

Because of the widespread problems discovered in the governor's race, there will be a focus on election reforms this session. Many ideas have already been discussed. Below are the bills that have been filed so far:

- Require everyone to re-register to vote to clean up voter rolls. **(Senate Bill 5078)**
- Require voters to mark ballot envelopes confirming United States citizenship. **(Senate Bill 5080)**
- Require absentee ballots to reach a county auditor's office by Election Day. **(Senate Bill 5082)**
- Allowing voters to indicate abstention from voting on any particular office. **(Senate Bill 5088)** This measure addresses one of issues related to "enhanced ballots" – a process where election workers try to determine a voter's intent when ballots are not correctly marked.

Legislature faces revenue shortfall, Republicans reject Locke's call for new taxes

At least a \$1.5 billion shortfall is expected for the 2005-07 biennium. The problem arises from the assumption that the state will:

- continue all current services to include funding the 400 percent increase in pension costs for the next two years and the 11 percent annual inflation cost of health care;
- maintain a \$300 million emergency reserve fund;
- pay the new costs of state employee collective bargaining
- fund I-732 teachers' cost of living increases;
- fund I-728 class size reduction; and
- fund increased higher education enrollments.

The revenue shortfall climbs to \$1.8 billion if we maintain the emergency reserve fund at its current level of \$641 million.

Majority Republicans in the Senate dealt with a huge revenue shortfall in 2003 without raising taxes.

The state's economy has gotten better since then, but our economic recovery still lags behind the rest of the nation. Our jobless rate is still higher than the national average. It is a bad time to increase the tax burden on struggling families and businesses. However, majority Democrats have enough votes in both the House and Senate to fill the budget gap with new taxes as proposed by Gov. Gary Locke before he left office.

Senate Republicans are committed to balancing the budget without resorting to damaging tax increases or draining the state's emergency reserve fund.

The budget will be an issue I'll certainly be keeping you updated on later this session.